DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 323 063 RC 017 717

AUTHOR Braswell, Maria
TITLE Families and Kinship in a Black Appalachian Community: Boone's Junaluska Neighborhood.
PUB DATE Mar 90
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Appalachian Studies Conference (Helen, GA, March 23-25, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Community; *Black Family; *Extended Family; Family Attitudes; *Family Relationship; Helping Relationship; *Kinship; Rural Family; Social Support Groups
IDENTIFIERS *Appalachia; *North Carolina (Boone)

ABSTRACT

Several small Black Appalachian communities in northwest North Carolina form a network of individuals and families connected by Black Mennonite churches and by blood and marital ties. This paper examines family relationships and attitudes toward family and kinship in one such community--the Junaluska neighborhood in the town of Boone (Watauga County). Information was gathered by in-depth interviews with 27 community members and meetings with 3 key informants--interested college students--and from three family histories compiled by community members. Most residents belonged to one of four large, primary family groups, and almost everyone else in the community had some connection to one of these groups. Kinship networks were very extensive and convoluted. In most cases they included children and spouses, families of orientation, grandchildren, nephews, nieces, aunts, uncles, cousins, spouses' kin, some other in-laws, and even fictive kin--friends and neighbors who were not blood related but were treated as such. These extended families provided members with emotional support, advice, help in time of crisis, child care, and material and monetary aid. Family gatherings were usually held on Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, and the Fourth of July. Several families held annual reunions, with distant relatives traveling hundreds of miles to attend. Family histories contained the underlying themes of family unity and preservation of the family's heritage, and helped the families to define their histories as Blacks with roots in Appalachia. (SV)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED323063

FAMILIES AND KINSHIP IN A BLACK APPALACHIAN COMMUNITY: BOONE'S JUNALUSKA NEIGHBORHOOD

By

Maria Braswell

Department of Anthropology

Appalachian State University

Paper prepared for the 1990 Appalachian Studies Conference,

Unicoi State Park, Helen, Georgia, March 23-25

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Maria Braswell

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

RC017717

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Families and Kinship in a Black Appalachian Community: Boone's Junaluska Neighborhood

Several small Black Appalachian communities in the northwestern region of North Carolina form a network of individuals and families connected by the area's Mennonite churches and by blood and marital ties. Located in the town of Boone in Watauga County, the Junaluska community is composed of Black families who are interrelated by these same ties.

In 1980, Watauga County had a Black population of 425, 294 of which were Boone residents. Junaluska contains the largest concentration of Blacks; however, there were no population figures for the number of Blacks living within the residents' own defined boundaries. Scattered along the border of the community are White households, which further complicates the process of determining the exact number of Black residents.

The only remaining active institution in the community is the Mennonite Brethren Church, one of six Black Mennonite churches located in the counties of Watauga, Caldwell, Avery, and Wilkes (Mackey, 1989). Most informants feel that the Mennonite church is the center of the community that works to provide proper religious instruction, a basis for social support, and a suitable social environment for Junaluska's youth.

Very little has been written about Junaluska residents as a group, and until last year, no studies of their cultural traits has been undertaken. During the spring and fall semesters of 1989, 27 in-depth structured interviews were conducted by Karee Mackey and me when we worked as research assistants for Dr. Susan Keefe.

The interviewees ranged in age from their early 20s to age 80. The majority have resided in the community most or all of their lives, and most have ancestral ties to the northwestern region of the state as well as current relations with extended families in Junaluska and in surrounding Black communities.

Other information was gathered somewhat informally. There were discussions with community members, our own observations of community and family life, and scheduled meetings with two key informants. These informants are ASU students and life-long Junaluska residents who are currently researching their own families' histories. Also, careful attention was given to three family history booklets that were compiled by members of Black families in the area.

As mentioned, a large majority of the Black residents are connected by blood and marriage. In our conversations with community members, we were frequently told that almost everyone in Junaluska is related in one way or another. And while that might seem to be an exaggeration on the part of these residents, we found their kinship networks to be very extensive and convoluted. The intricacies of those family systems were difficult for us as outsiders to learn and remember.

Early on in our research, we found that there are four very common surnames, which led us to believe there were four large primary family groups. However, a few residents informed us that two of those groups were each divided into different "sets"--subgroups that share a common surname, but supposedly have no interconnecting blood ties. It never became completely clear

to us if this was actually the case, or if many years ago, related family members with the same surname for some reason began forming separate groups, and as time passed, connections were simply forgotten.

One family group has lost a high number of members due to out-migration and death in the past few decades, but still has many descendents in Junaluska. Traditionally, there has been a high degree of intermarriage between residents who belong to these four primary groups, and almost all of those few smaller Black families with different surnames are in some way related to members of these primary groups. The fact that residents are so closely connected helps to explain the more common trend of young people choosing marriage partners who have fewer or no blood kin in the community.

In contrast to white Appalachians who tend to consider blood ties to be more significant than ties formed through marriage (Keefe, 1988), Black Appalachians tend to have a broader definition of family . They too include their children and spouses, families of orientation, as well as grandchildren, nephews, nieces, aunts, uncles, and certain cousins. But most also consider their spouses' kin and their other in-laws to be part of their families. A significant emphasis is placed on fictive kin -- those friends and neighbors who are not blood-related but are treated as such. In many cases, there are some non-kin who are considered to be part of the informant's family and who typically have been incorporated into it by participating in family gatherings and celebrations and by being supportive in times of need.

Although some community members used terms such as "kin" and "set," it seemed that most interviewees generally did not consistently categorize their conceptualizations of "family" into a number of bounded, term-specific groups. Instead, most seemed to divide family into two basic categories.

The first category of family includes those who are very close to them, both emotionally and geographically. Some interviewees made a distinction within this group between those who reside with them and those who do not. Those who lived with them were labeled "immediate" family or "close" family. With other informants, no distinction was made, and most of this type were labeled as "immediate" family, whether or not they lived in the same residence.

The second general category of family is composed of those kin who reside in distant locations and are seen infrequently or not at all. These individuals were sometimes loosely termed "kin" or "relatives," but again, these terms were not used consistently by most informants.

Lastly, the Junaluska families appear to be bilateral; there was no evidence to suggest that they do not assign equal importance to both the mother's and father's lines of descent.

Some interviewees expressed a deep appreciation for the type of family and community life experienced in earlier decades, citing negative changes brought about by the recent higher divorce and cohabitation rates, as well as by out-migration. In the past, both nuclear and extended families are said to have been more closely attached and loyal to one another, making

family and thus community relations less strained and more supportive. And while these are all ostensible changes that they take into consideration, most informants believe that there are relatively strong attachments within and between their families. The important role and influence of family ties are obvious through holiday gatherings and celebrations, exchanges of emotional support and material items, and family reunions.

The holidays with the most meaning are Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. The Mennonite Church holds special services and programs at Christmas and Easter. On Thanksgiving and Christmas, many families have private gatherings in their homes, often with some out-of-town relatives attending. Typically, there are holiday meals prepared and family members play games, look at photographs, and visit with each other. Before Christmas, some extended families draw names and exchange gifts on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. The Fourth of July also has been traditionally celebrated with family barbecues and socializing with friends and neighbors.

The propinquity of extended families facilitates mutual exchange between households, especially those who are closely related. Emotional support is expressed through regular visiting, advice-giving, and support during illnesses and after deaths.

The frequency of visiting that occurs between "immediate" family members seemed to vary from a few times a day to once or twice a week, depending on the individuals involved and the circumstances. Sometimes telephone calls are more convenient,

especially with busy work schedules and inclement weather. Visits rarely appeared to be scheduled, and such factors as illness and advanced age naturally affected the number of times a relative was visited or called.

Advice-giving was said to be more common among older people who want to positively influence the actions of younger family members. However, when younger members are knowledgeable in a specific area that the others are not, they will advise middle-aged and elderly family members.

Community residents are very supportive when a family is suffering a crisis. For example, when a death occurs, many neighbors visit the family to offer their condolences and attend the regular visitation services. A group of men volunteers to dig the deceased's grave. The funeral is held in the Mennonite Brethren Church and internment follows at Clarissa Hill, the local Black cemetery. Afterwards, community members take prepared food to the church fellowship hall where everyone eats a meal with the deceased's family. The role of such rituals in maintaining the community's unity was indicated by one young woman who, when asked how she personally defined family, answered that to her, it "would include anyone in times of crises...in a lot of ways [family] would be the whole community, because everyone comes together during a crisis."

Material items exchanged between households include garden produce, furniture, clothing, baby-sitting, and monetary aid. Exchange of these items occurs on a fairly regular basis, whether or not there is any kind of economic hardship.

Family reunions usually occur once each year, with members who live in various locations hundreds of miles away attending such scheduled events as barbecues, business meetings, and dinners. One annual reunion for three of the family groups mentioned earlier was organized about ten years ago. Each July, out-of- town relatives gather with those kin residing in Watauga County to spend the weekend. Each year, a list of events is scheduled on an agenda. Relatives from Philadelphia who migrated out of Boone during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s travel on a chartered Trailways bus with younger members of their family to attend the reunion.

Each of the reunions we identified was organized to include two or three family groups. Similarly, each family history booklet we obtained covered two or three surnames and indicated the connections between those, even though they were written to eventually focus on one primary line of descent.

These histories are fairly short, unpublished, and seem to have been the result of a group effort. In addition to genealogical data, all of the booklets include photographs of members as well as poetry and articles submitted by family members. Other elements found in one or two, but not all of the histories, include reunion constitutions, listings of reunion officers, and family directories with telephone numbers and addresses.

Present in all histories are the underlying themes of family unity and the significance of preserving their past histories.

These attitudes are thoroughly reflected and embodied in one reunion constitution that presents the purpose of the reunion as being to:

> re-unite [sic] all relatives and friends of the subject families on a regular predetermined schedule; to fellowship, socialize, exchange experiences; to learn, remember and rehearse to each other and our children the rich history of our forebears; to foster the social, cultural, civic, and spiritual well-being of all.

In addition to functioning to integrate kin networks over long distances, these booklets and reunions help the families to define their histories as Blacks with roots in Appalachia.

More research is needed to expand and clarify our present knowledge on both the histories and the current lifestyles of Blacks within the Appalachian Mountains. Particularly interesting are the formation of Black families in the 19th century and the origins and preservation of their unique cultural traits over time. By broadening the range and depth of research in this subject area, the academic community can work to engender and foster an active interest in Black Appalachians' heritage, their culture, and the future of their communities.

NOTES

Acknowledgment: Funding for this study was provided by the College of Arts & Sciences, Appalachian State University.

References Cited

Keefe, Susan Emley

1988 Appalachian Family Ties. In Appalachian Mental Health. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

Mackey, Karee

1989 "The Formation of a Black Community in Western North Carolina." Unpublished paper, Appalachian State University.